The Behavior Analyst 1991, 14, 23–24 No. 1 (Spring)

Humble (Yet Assertive) Behaviorism

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"If behaviorists were more humble, their effectiveness as scientists would increase." My initial response to this hypothesis, presented by Allen Neuringer in his article "Humble Behaviorism," was a covert, "Yes, he's probably right." Indeed, I agreed with most of Neuringer's arguments in support of his hypothesis. On further consideration, however, it seemed important to suggest some qualifications to Neuringer's admonition that we behave more humbly.

Neuringer's hypothesis is testable. To test the hypothesis, one would have to begin by defining "humility" and "effectiveness as scientists" operationally. Neuringer provides a definition of "humility" as he sees that term applying to behavioral researchers: "tentativeness of theoretical and methodological positions, willingness to consider alternative views, support for diversity, openness to criticism." He also suggests some response classes that might be included in a behavioral definition of "humility": communicating successfully with others who study behavior, whether or not they use the methods and language of the experimental analysis of behavior; describing experimental procedures and results comprehensively and precisely; conducting experiments that are not constrained by particular theories or methods; validating findings from animal research with human subjects; studying the effects of endogenous and randomly-occurring independent variables as well as controllable, environmental ones; and providing constructive criticism to other scientists, to name some.

Neuringer does not, however, address explicitly what constitutes "effectiveness as scientists." I would like to propose some indices of scientific effectiveness, and suggest that in these arenas "humility," at least in its extreme forms, might not serve us very well. Consider the following as a nonexhaustive list of areas in which our performance as behavioral scientists might be measured: 1) obtaining funding for research; 2) establishing and changing public policies; 3) communicating our methods and findings to the lay public; 4) solving critical, everyday social problems by affecting behavior change practices (in education, rehabilitation, mental health services, child care, government, law enforcement, business, medicine, etc.); and 5) establishing and maintaining behavior analytic courses and curricula in elementary, secondary, and higher educational institutions. It is not my purpose here to try to assess our effectiveness in these areas to date. Probably many readers will agree that we have not yet achieved optimal performance in any of them (cf. Marr, 1984; Pennypacker, 1986; Seekins & Fawcett, 1986). And we will not, I will argue, if we are too humble.

It seems reasonable to conceive of "humility" as a constellation of behaviors near one end of a continuum, with "arrogance" anchoring the other end. Neuringer implies (and I agree) that in many areas the behavior of behaviorists tends to be very close to the "arrogant" end of the continuum, and he would give our collective pendulum a hearty push toward the "humble" end. I fear that should the pendulum come to rest there, it will prove as nonfunctional as extreme arrogance. Perhaps the best place for us to be is closer to the middle of the continuum, behaving in ways that might be characterized as humble, yet assertive.

According to my Webster's, the verb "assert" means, "1. to state positively; declare; affirm. 2. to maintain or defend (rights, claims, etc.)." Granted, these are not operational definitions, but they suggest a couple of important points. First, "assertiveness," like "humility," is likely to be inferred primarily from our spoken and written verbal behavior. In addition, note that these definitions contrast sharply with the tentativeness that is included in Neuringer's definition of "humility." If our verbal behavior is too humble, without a generous sprinkling of assertions, we are likely neither to garner many reinforcers nor to be very effective in the arenas I enumerated above. Take research funding, for example. When we write and defend proposals for behavioral research to funding agencies and reviewers, verbal behaviors that reflect some aspects of Neuringer's humble behaviorism are likely to pay off: willingness to consider alternative views, openness to criticism, and integration of methods and findings from other disciplines, for instance. (This may prove to be even more true in the 1990's than ever before.) But if our verbal behavior is too tentative, and we fail to assert our knowledge of the literature, our previous contributions, and the power of our methods (with adequate documentation, of course), then we are not likely to convince the decision-makers to give us money. Analogous cases can be made regarding our efforts in public policymaking, communicating with the general public, social problem-solving, and education.

In all humility, therefore, I assert that Neuringer's advice to us to behave more humbly should be taken with a grain of the salt of well-earned confidence in our methods and our track record. If behaviorists blend humility with assertiveness, their effectiveness as scientists is likely to increase.

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